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ABSTRACT

This study sought to determine which classroom and school policies and practices high school students perceived as affecting their academic and social engagement with their school. In each of six high schools in Florida, administrators, counselors, teachers, and 10th and 12th grade students were interviewed. In-depth interviews were conducted with 178 adolescents: individual interviews were conducted with 101 students and small group interviews were conducted with the remaining 77 students. Individual interviewees were in the school's general track while group interviewees were primarily in the college track. Students in all schools reported positive experiences both in learning situations and with teachers and peers. For many students, however, these experiences were idiosyncratic rather than being built into the policy and practice structure of the school. The data revealed important contrasts between the policies of the high, median, and low graduation districts within the sample. In districts with the high graduation rate, affirmative policies generated a belief that students were important and adults cared whether or not they succeeded. Principals in these schools had clear mission statements and a public agenda; faculty contributions were valued. (NB)

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ENGAGEMENT WITH LEARNING: THE STUDENT PERSPECTIVE

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ENGAGEMENT WITH LEARNING: THE STUDENT PERSPECTIVE

Demographic studies of high school dropouts have provided us with profiles of those most likely to leave school before graduation. Unfortunately, however, these profiles do not predict who among these students will actually drop out and who will persist to graduation. Thus, if we are to take seriously the challenge to increase school retention, we need to move beyond mere demographics and instead focus on those alterable characteristics of schools which have the potential to keep academically at-risk students actively engaged with their education. But what characteristics of schooling are most important for bonding adolescents to educational institutions?

Little research is available which examines schooling from the perspective of those at risk of becoming dropouts. Yet these type of data are important if we are to design programs to retain students in school and provide them with pedagogically sound educational experiences. The purpose of this study was to determine those classroom and school policies and practices which high school students indicated affected their academic and social engagement with school. This study is part of a larger funded project focused on understanding Florida's dropout rate.

Florida's 1988-89 dropout rate of 41.4 percent was the highest of all 50 states (U.S. Statistical Abstract, 1989). But the problem of high drop out rates is not confined to Florida alone. Since school districts define "dropouts" differently, it is difficult to obtain exact statistics, but an estimated drop out rate for the nation is 13.5 percent, with larger cities showing a 50 percent or higher rate. Tragically, it has repeatedly been documented that young people who do

not possess a high school diploma are effectively blocked from participating in the mainstream of social and economic life (Catterall, 1987; Morgan, 1984). As marginal adults these individuals consume a disproportionate amount of social services, constituting a drain on a state's limited resources. At the same time, available data indicate that the social and economic impact of programs which successfully promote high school completion ar both worthwhile and cost-effective (Levin, 1989).

Research already available on effective school programs indicates that through directing attention toward the modifiable aspects of the educational process it is possible to substantially increase successful school completion rates, even for students who are at high risk of school failure (Schultz, Toles & Rice, 1986). The most powerful determinants of school leaving are not family and economic background factors, but low grades and disciplinary problems (Ekstrom, Goertz, Pollack, & Rock, 1987); OERI, 1987). For instance, traditional disciplinary sanctions have the effect of convincing potential dropouts that they are not really wanted at school. And this communication may be most clear in schools with ethnically diverse student bodies who differ from the faculty and staff who serve them (Rumburger, 1987; Wehlage, 1986). Schools can, in effect, send out signals to at-risk youth that they are neither able nor worthy to continue to graduation (Wehlage, 1986). How are these signals perceived by students?

We know that the decision to drop out is complex and the culmination of a gradual process of disengagement (Catterall, 1986). And if we are to retain students, we need to understand the signals which trigger this process of disengagement. In an effort to understand

both physical and psychological withdrawal from school, research using the concept of engagement has begun to appear (cf. Farrell, 1988; Fine, 1986; Miller, Leinhardt, & Zigmond, 1988; Newman, 1989; Wehlage, 1989). Some of this work has sought to tap into the student's perspective, generally through the use of questionnaires. Interview studies have tended to be confined to singe schools involving very small populations or focused on students participating in alternative programs. Using the concepts of academic and social engagement (Miller, et al.) this study sought to extend earlier findings by interviewing a larger population of students drawn from schools located in several different districts. Moreover, this study was designed to explore the attitudes toward school policies and practices from the perspective of the average student - those in the general track of their high schools. It is easy to identify those students who will go to college and those most likely to drop out. But those in the middle may tip either way - they may successfully complete high school or without much warning drop out. What do these students have to say about their school's policies.

Methods

Data for this study were collected as part of a larger study designed to determine which students were dropping out of Florida's schools, why they were dropping out, and why some districts were more successful than others in graduating high risk students. Comprehensive case studies were completed on three Florida's school districts using an embedded case study design (Yin, 1989), which permit analysis and comparison of data within and across differing organizational levels. Since our intent was to understand schools from the per-

spective of those attending and working in them, we selected interviewing as the prime data collection procedure. We didn't feel we knew enough about the feelings and attitudes of students to develop surveys which would limit and focus responses. For purposes of triangulation a variety of documents were collected from each district and each high school in the sample. These included policy statements, program descriptions, and annual reports.

Sample

District and high school sample.

School districts in Florida encompass an entire county. There are thus 67 school districts in the state, one for each county. Districts were selected to be included within the study on the basis first of their graduation rate and then on other demographic variables such as district size, variation of communities within the district on an urban-rural continuum, and sociodemographic mix of their student population.

First all 67 school districts in the state were ranked by graduation rate. Districts were then divided into three ranks reflecting variation in graduation rates: high, low and median. Other district demographic data were supplied by the DoE's Management Information Services (MIS). In cooperation with the Office of Policy Research and Improvement, State Department of Education, one district from each rank was selected for inclusion in the study. The sample selection process was designed to insure that districts included within the study were representative of other districts within the state.

The state Commissioner of Education wrote to the superintendent in each of the selected districts requesting their participation in the study. In each district an individual in the central administra-

tion was designated as project liaison.

In each of the three districts heads of student services, curriculum, and testing were interviewed. Two high schools within each district were then selected for in depth study. These schools were selected to reflect variations within a county in terms of such factors as urban-rural, type of student population served, and graduation rate. In each of these six high schools a sampling of administrators, counselors, teachers and 10th and 12th grade students were interviewed.

Student sample.

Schools were provided with a list of the type of student we wished to interview by grade level, sex, race/ethnicity, and ability track. They were then free to select the specific students who fit these descriptors. Since time constraints did not permit interviewing students at all grade levels, some decisions had to be made on whom to include. We decided to tap the experiences of those near the beginning of high school and those close to graduation. The 10th grade was selected since this was the beginning grade in several of the high schools in the sample. Seniors were interviewed to provide insights of those who have spent several years in high school.

In depth interviews were completed with 178 adolescents in the six high schools included within the sample. Individual interviews were conducted with 101 of the students, while the remaining 77 students were interviewed in 18 groups of between four and six. One of the researchers was bilingual and thus able to interview Hispanic students in Spanish or English depending on their preference.

Students interviewed individually were in their high school's general track, though some of them were taking basic skills level

classes. Group interviews were primarily with students in college track and advanced placement courses. These interviews were designed as a validity check on the individual interviews and to examine the extent to which perceptions of school or varied across track placement. Table 1 summarizes the sex and race/ethnicity of the students interviewed.

Insert Table 1 here

Procedures

Instrument development.

Interview protocols were developed based upon a review of the at-risk research literature, required as part of the grant's final report. The purpose of the student interviews was to tap their perceptions of school in terms of both academic and social engagement. Under Academic Engagement there were eight families, or sets, of questions: Teacher-learning strategies, high school graduation & aspirations, instructional context, school policies (school rules, tardies, homework, language other than English), study hall, academic perceptions of self and others, study skills, and evaluation of schooling. Social Engagement included four families of questions: School climate, student behavior, interpersonal relationships (student-teacher and student-student), and extracurricular activities.

The interview protocols were open-ended enough to illicit the individual experiences and beliefs of those being interviewed while containing enough structure to permit comparisons across respondents.

Rough drafts of the interviews were submitted to the DoE's Office of Policy Research & Improvement for review and revision. Interview protocols were then pilot tested and questions which provided little relevant information or which were redundant were deleted.

The interviews.

All interviews were conducted during school hours in quiet, private rooms in order to insure confidentiality. The individual student interviews ranged from 90 minutes to two hours in length. The 18 group interviews were somewhat shorter ranging from 45 minutes to one and a half hours.

All interview data were typed directly into laptop computers, removing the need to have tapes transcribed. All of the researchers were fast typists and able to get near verbatim notes from all interviews. Cleaning up spelling was the only task that needed to be completed before transcripts could be printed out. Thus a couple of days after the interviews, transcripts were available to the researchers.

In order to protect confidentiality, no names were recorded on any of the notes. Only data on race/ethnicity, sex, grade level, track placement, school, and beginning and ending times of the interviews were recorded.

Data Analysis

To facilitate analysis, the Ethnograph program (Seidel, 1988) was used. This program is designed to assist qualitative researchers in many of the mechanical aspects associated with text data analysis. The research reported in this paper focuses on students' perceptions of their school's policies and practices and their reflections on classroom instruction.

Results

We began this research believing that if students were engaged with either the academic or social system of their school they would be likely to persist to graduation. And indeed we still believe this. But as we have talked to one adolescent after another we have come to realize how tightly these two systems are intertwined - to the point where it is impossible to neatly consign school experiences to one realm or the other. Thus, in taking seriously the task of understanding the ways in which schools unconsciously push students out, it makes sense to examine the school as it is experienced by adolescents themselves - at the classroom and institutional levels. While this discussion will focus on each of these arenas sequentially, we recognize that they impinge on each other in various subtle ways.

In order to put the following results in context we should first remind ourselves that to an adolescent high school means attending seven different classes a day with only five minute breaks between them punctuated by a 25 to 45 minute lunch break, depending on whether students are permitted to leave campus to eat. They have little to say about the courses they must take in order to meet graduation requirements and generally no say at all about school-wide policies and practices that directly affect their daily lives.

The Classroom

While students in any single school reported wide variations in classroom experiences, descriptions of instructional processes and relationships with teacher were repeated across all 178 adolescents interviewed. That is, regardless of institutional policies and practices, similar classroom experiences were reported by students in all six schools. Their evaluations of classes revolved around the

formal delivery of instruction and the behaviors of teachers and their relationships with students. Given the similarity of students' comments, this part of the discussion will not attempt to sort out variations across districts or schools.

Instruction.

We were overwhelmed by the almost universal student lament that school is dull and boring. We might have predicted this perspective from students in the general or basic skill tracks, but this sentiment was echoed just as loudly by those in the college track and in advanced placement courses. Moreover, this was not a "cop-out" to excuse lack of engagement with learning. Indeed one of the things that impressed us the most was that students wanted to learn and were angry when teachers or institutional features interfered with this process.

> *A lot of teachers act like if you ask a question you're bothering them. I don't understand why a lot of them are here - they don't act like they want to be.*

> *My geometry teacher is so boring and she doesn't know how to explain things; you feel so stupid in her class.*

> *I realized as I started to take higher level classes that the lower level classes would be geared to making people drop out. A lot of them don't know how to teach. They are bored themselves and they pass this on.*

The heart of many students' complaints about instruction revealed a perceived dichotomy in the objectives of teaching. Students wanted to master course material and understand how it related to their lives or the world in which they lived. But many teachers, they insisted, were obsessed instead with "covering" rather than teaching content.

The covering strategy that most offended students regardless of their track placement, was the assignment to "read the chapter and answer the questions at the end". In fact in one discussion a student kept insisting that two days a week was not enough instructional time in which to learn American history. I finally had to ask him were there some courses which were taught only two days a week. He looked at me curiously and then remarked "no", but then continued by explaining that he didn't consider students sitting quietly reading the chapter in class as teaching. He went on to state that he could understand that a teacher might want to do this one day a week, but not three or four. This was also the instructional strategy that every interviewed student stated was the least effective in helping them learn new material.

Math was singled out by large numbers as the subject in which teachers seemed least willing or capable of helping them understand course content. Math teachers, more than others, appeared to be unable to translate their discipline into words that made sense to their students. Moreover, students said their math teachers were impatient with them when they are unable to grasp mathematical concepts and automatically assumed that they weren't paying attention: "...he really knows calculus, but can't teach it to us." But according to the students we interviewed, they genuinely didn't understand but wanted to, and so raised questions in class. Math teachers,

however, were by no means alone in having difficulty translating their subject into concepts and explanations that students could understand. In fact, a frequent complaint of students across subjects was teachers who didn't know how to teach.

Regardless of the discipline, students complained about those instructors who publicly made fun of them in front of the class, usually for asking a question. Thus, the willingness to "explain" became an important component in student evaluations of teachers, especially since they encountered so many who wouldn't.

While this assessment may sound very negative, students were able to provide numerous examples of excellent teachers. These teachers accompanied their lectures with outlines of main points, used total class discussions, group projects, films, outside speakers, and various other devices to help students learn. They also related the content to topics of interest to students. In other words, these teachers did not take students' interests for granted; instead they worked to make the classroom an interesting place.

> *I like it when teachers explain things and go over homework.*

> *I like a teacher who gives you some examples and relates it to what you are doing - relate the material to you.*

> *Group work helps as long as it is relevant to what you are learning.*

Relationships within classrooms.

Instructional strategies are, of course, just one part of the equation that adds up to successful teaching and learning. The other is the social-learning climate that exists within the classroom. On the negative side were such teacher characteristics as talking in a monotone, never smiling, and being unable to control their classes. Reported also were encounters with teachers who obviously didn't like students or teaching: "*If the teachers don't care, then why should we care*". At several of the schools students reported teachers who had told their classes: "*I don't care whether you learn the material or not, I'll get paid the same.*"

To balance this picture, all students could report positive experiences with teachers. Those teacher qualities which helped them learn included:

> *She makes things fun. She kids around.*
> *If you hear something funny it clicks.*
>
> *I like fun teachers who motivate you. They do things that connect with you, use slang words, use movies, games, rap sessions. They go into a subject and relate it to teenagers.*

In other words, students said they learned the most from those teachers who not only knew their material and could communicate it, but who also acted as if they enjoyed teaching adolescents.

The School Context

Districts were selected for inclusion within this study based on variations in their high school graduation rates. It is not surprising then that the variability encountered in the data reflects these

distinctions. Three major differences across districts were (1) beliefs that students were either responsible or had to be watched and monitored at all times, (2) the extent to which they used either the "carrot or the stick" approach in attempting to foster student compliance with such school-wide rules as average daily attendance and being in class on time, and (3) the development of a safety net of policies and programs geared to helping academically marginal students experience success. Since it is difficult to separate beliefs from the policies that grow out of them, this section will contrast some of the positive and negative stances taken by schools and their subsequent policies.

Students are responsible vs. need to be watched.

The district with the highest graduation rate stressed that students were responsible and this meant they had be given opportunities in which to make choices. This theme was repeated in interviews with the administrative staff, teachers and students. For example, the principal of this school described setting up a senior eating area in a room behind the stage at the end of the cafeteria. She felt that seniors should have some lunch privileges even though they couldn't leave the campus. Adults never entered the senior lunch room either to monitor behavior or to clean up; students were responsible for conditions in their eating area. A clock was put on the wall so students could tell when they needed to be back in class since there weren't any bells in the cafeteria. The principal said she had told the seniors that next year they would either be working or in college and would be responsible for getting where they needed to be on time, and she knew they could do it this year as well. The next day, in an interview with a senior I asked whether he was every tardy

to his fifth period class after lunch. He looked shocked, paused, and then responded by saying that:

> *No, I'm never late. There's a clock in the senior cafeteria. I'm responsible for getting myself to class on time. After all, next year no one will follow me around and see that I get anyplace on time.*

In contrast, the district with the lowest graduation rate felt students needed to be constantly watched. This belief manifested itself in a series of policies and practices which made the school seem like a prison, as many students put it. For example, there had been some problems with getting students to put their trash in the barrels in the cafeteria. The solution was to video-tape the cafeteria and have someone preview the tape at the end of each day to catch students. Additionally, administrators, teachers, and counselors, each with a walkie-talkie, made a show of patrolling the halls of this school along with a sheriff's deputy complete with gun on his belt. One student at this school commented:

> *It's not that I'm against the rules of conduct, but you feel that everyone is watching you. If you think that people are watching you, you think maybe you will do something wrong. People in the office, in the halls, police. Everywhere, people watching you.*

If the constant watching of high schoolers were effective, a case could be made for strict surveillance. But according to the students we interviewed, the adult monitoring of student behavior was ineffectual since they didn't know what to look for. To illustrate this, in

one school the administration and faculty made sure that no gang colors were worn by students and that students didn't use profanity or wear revealing clothes (shoulders and stomachs had to be covered). The adults we interviewed were convinced that they had been successful in controlling deviant behavior. The students, however, reported that the adults failed to see the frequent exchange of drugs and weapons.

The carrot vs. the stick.

Districts varied widely in their orientation to their students. As might be anticipated, the high graduation district provided a number of incentives to its students to comply with school rules and regulations whereas the district with the lowest graduation rate was overtly punitive while the median graduation district fell between them.

Students cannot act responsibly if they don't know the rules for which they are being held accountable. The high graduation rate district established a process through which all students could learn the school's rules and the consequences for breaking them. At the beginning of the school year the student handbook was covered in every English class and students had to pass a test on it.

Other districts were not as systematic in insuring that their students knew the rules. The usual practice was for students to sign a form acknowledging receipt of the conduct code. Their signature was to indicate that they had read it. But there was no check on whether they had in fact read the conduct code. The reasons for this lack of follow up might be found in student comments about equality in terms of punishment. The high graduation rate district was the only one where students reported that what happened to you when you broke a rule did not depend on who you were. In sharp contrast, in the

district with the low graduation rate students were more likely than those at other schools to report that punishments for infractions of rules depended on who you were.

Other qualities of school life frequently varied by who you were. At a school in the low graduation district, students in the college bound track talked freely with us about checking into classes and then making up excuses to get out of those they found boring. The president of the student government reported that he could walk past five administrators or teachers in the hall, all of whom would speak, but none of whom would ask for a hall pass or where he was going. In a group interview the high achieving students commented on how awful it must be to have your every step challenged by teachers; in fact, they could give specific instances of this happening to students in their classes.

Tardies to classes appear to be the bane of a school's teachers and administrative staff; it is a subject of frequent discussion. In our sample districts handled it differently with different consequences. Again we can contrast the district with the high graduation rate to the others. In an effort to reward students for being on time to classes, the high graduation rate district had developed a sliding scale depending on class grades. Under this policy so many tardies equaled an absence. And students below the cut off in terms of permitted absences were excused from end of semester exams. Tests over large hunks of material are particularly frightening to academically marginal students; those we interviewed said this had been a real incentive in getting to class on time.

Students in other schools talked about spending time visiting with friends between classes or oversleeping and being late in the morning. Tardies did not seem to bother many of them. In one district there were no consistent school wide policies and each teacher made his or her own. Thus seven different teachers handed out seven different sets of policies to students who had to remember variations which included in which class being in the room but not in the seat constituted a tardy and in which one there was a 30 second grace period after the bell rang. Still others reported that some teachers didn't count tardies unless you were late all the time - an escape from the paperwork imposed on teachers.

Similar variations were reported around the practice of cutting classes. Cutting classes was almost nonexistent in the district with the high graduation rate. Students reported that you couldn't learn if you weren't in class and if you did cut a class you were likely to get caught: *"Anyone who skips in this school is stupid because they'll get caught."* In other districts the consequences were not so explicit. For instance, students in the schools in the low and median graduation districts talked about the ways in which their hallways and school grounds were monitored, but then went on to elaborate the strategies used by students to avoid classes and stay in the building or leave by routes the administration had not discovered. Students in these schools were not very likely to get caught cutting and if they did the punishment varied by who they were.

We encountered one approach to forcing student compliance that appeared to have backfired. The low graduation district had decided that students with unexcused absences from classes would have their grades in those classes lowered one letter for each such absence.

Unfortunately, teachers were not always sure what constituted an unexcused absence, sometimes students weren't marked in attendance when they were, or the office hadn't notified teachers that students were excused. Consequently, the day we were at one of the schools in the district it was holding hearings for 400 students, one-third the student body, who were appealing the lowering of their grades. A guidance counselor stated that she had been cutting the grades off student transcripts to colleges until the appeals were all settled because some of the school's brightest students looked like they were failing all their subjects. As a consequence of this policy, a male student said that he was moving to New York to live with his father for the remainder of the year so that he wouldn't end up failing his sophomore year. Other students talked about kids they knew who had decided there was no way they could pass all their subjects given this policy and so had dropped out or transferred to the high school diploma program at a nearby community college.

The safety net.

How a district goes about trying to assist its academically marginal students in being successful reveals a lot about its orientation to education and students. Consistently the high graduation district, along with its belief that students were responsible and its use of positive reinforcement to elicit rule compliance, offered the best thought out and most complete safety net for its at-risk students.

This district provided a number of different ways for students to work their way back into the social and academic systems. In recognition that one of the real problems many academically marginal students have is in acquiring the requisite number of credits needed

to graduate, especially with their classmates, schools in this district had developed a series of special courses that covered state competencies for two subject areas simultaneously. Students taking these special courses could earn two credits in one class period. These special courses were supplemented by night school classes for those in the 9th grade and up who needed credits in subjects not covered in the special courses. Students were also able to be promoted to the next highest grade in mid-year with the proviso that they attend summer school and thus "catch up" in terms of credits with the other students in the grade.

A variety of other support services were available to students in the high graduation district. The one most frequently mentioned by students was the willingness of their teachers to help them with their courses after school. Tutoring was available daily in the library during lunch periods and a resource teacher provided intensive one-on-one instruction for those students having the most difficulties. All athletes who were not on the A/B Honor Roll were required to participate in a 45 minute study hall after school before practice. This study hall had been established by the coaches, who also monitored it. The coaches checked on the grades of the athletes every three weeks. In contrast, a student on the track team in the district with the lowest graduation rate remarked that he had failed a subject first semester but that his coach still didn't know about it and so he was still on the team.

In consistent ways districts varied in their approaches to discipline problems. The point has already been made that students in schools in the median and low graduation districts reported that consequences for rule infractions depended on who you were. In terms

of the safety-net, however, one additional contrast can be made. One of the policies in the high graduation district stated that if a student had had two discipline referrals to the office but then went a month before a third one, he or she would have that third referral treated, in terms of consequences, as if it were a second one. The same, of course, applied to first and second referrals. On the other hand, a white female in the college bound track at a school in the low graduation district stated:

> *There is no way here you can ever wipe the slate clean. No matter what you do, they always hold it over your head.*

This latter school was the one where we were told the senior class theme song was *"We Didn't Start the Fire"*.

One final one contrast between our sample districts is worth describing in terms of the safety-net. Schools have become concerned that students, specifically those who are academically marginal, do not participate in extracurricular activities. These activities are seen as a device to build attachment to school, something that many at-risk students don't have. And yet it appears that schools do little but lament this lack of involvement. From the student perspective participation in these activities is not always convenient.

In the median and low graduation districts all extracurricular activities were held after school. Freshmen and sophomores were unable to stay if they rode the bus and didn't have anyone who could pick them up later in the afternoon. Students across SES lines encountered this as an obstacle, but it was particularly serious for those from lower social classes. By the time students were juniors and seniors they had gotten jobs to fund cars and other teenage

consumer goods. We found in our interviews that not only did jobs interfere with homework but, perhaps even more seriously, they focused adolescents' attention away from school. Students reported developing friendship networks and attachments at their places of employment and gradually spending larger amounts of time there. Those students who did not become involved in activities in their first two years of high school were unlikely to ever do so.

Like those in the other two districts studied, those in the high graduation district felt that extracurricular activities were important for adolescents. But unlike the other two, they had done something to foster participation. Activities were divided into an A and a B list. On the first and third Thursdays of each month time was built into the schedule for first the A and then the B activities to meet. Students not in an activity had a study hall. Not surprisingly, all the students interviewed at schools in this district participated in at least one, but usually more, activities.

Discussion

Our data contained important contrasts between the policies of the high, median, and low graduation districts in our sample. We have not even begun in this paper to discuss the ways in which Black and Hispanic students were consistently placed in lower track classes despite evidence that these placements were inappropriate or the ways in which students in oversubscribed honors classes were moved to fundamental or basic skills classes if they happened to meet during the same class period. But rather than just continue, we would like to pause and reflect on what school means to students who attend high schools.

First it should be noted that students in all schools reported

positive experiences both in learning situations and with teachers and peers. But for many students these experiences were idiosyncratic - they occurred because a student happened to be assigned to the right teacher's class or for some reason an adult in the school sponsored them and provided them with opportunities to be successful. In other words, good experiences weren't built into the policy and practice structure of most schools. They appeared to be flukes, chance events.

It is admittedly difficult for a school to monitor what goes on inside classrooms behind closed doors. Furthermore, we do not believe it is in the best interest of students and staff that uniformity be imposed on every classroom. But schools do need to use those mechanisms available to them to ensure that all students are receiving appropriate instruction from properly trained teachers. Certainly at a minimum they should not be subjected to verbal abuse, as were many of the students in our sample. Students want to learn and they want teachers who want to teach them.

Schools have more control over school-wide than classroom policies and practices, and need seriously to examine the consequences of them. Our data indicate that those schools which spend a lot of time trying to catch students misbehaving have encouraged their students to compete against them in a game to see how much they can get away with. It is in these schools that we find students describing ways to cut classes without being caught. And more significantly, it is in these schools that we find students just going through the motions - there is little engagement with learning and many students are alienated. How could it be otherwise when school officials feel compelled to place signs around their buildings proclaiming NO STUDENTS ALLOWED. In schools such as these the academically achieving students report

the same conditions as do those in basic skills and general track classes; its just that achievers have more coping strategies than those doing less well.

Schools do not need to be grim places. In the district with the high graduation rate affirmative policies generated a belief that students were important and adults cared whether or not they succeeded. In response, students described their schools using terms such as *family, friends who I'll miss when I graduate, and warm.* These were the schools where principals had clear mission statements and an agenda that was public; where faculty contributions were valued. They worked to actively engage their students both academically and socially - and were paid high dividends in response.

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Table 1

Description of Student Population
by Race/Ethnicity and Sex

	n (178)	Percent of Total Population
FEMALES	94	52.8
BF	28	15.7
WF	52	29.2
HF	12	6.7
AF	2	1.1
MALES	84	47.2
BM	20	11.2
WM	50	28.1
HM	12	6.7
AM	2	1.1
WHITES	102	57.3
BLACKS	48	27.0
HISPANICS	24	13.5
ASIANS	4	2.2